

It's All About the Teacher

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We asserted in our first installment (in the October 2007 issue of *The Reading Teacher*), and believe most readers of this column recognize, that the teacher—more than any other factor—has the greatest influence on student achievement (Hattie, 2003). Teachers of content literacy who have a positive effect on student achievement not only possess a toolkit of strategies and practices for heightening engagement and developing academic vocabularies but also understand the importance of building meaningful relationships with students as a context for greater participation and more enthusiastic learning. These teachers understand the physical, psychosocial, and cognitive characteristics of their students (Manning, 2002). In addition, they strive to learn what students count as literacy in their lives and in their out-of-school environments (Brozo & Simpson, 2007).

Engaging Through Insistence

If the achievement gap facing economically disadvantaged and minority youth is to be bridged, students need a positive environment characterized by a clear delineation of academic and behavioral expectations (Ross, Bondy, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2008). Once that is established, successful content area teachers send a consistent message that all students will meet the literacy and learning expectations of the classroom. Irvine and Fraser (1998) characterized these teachers as “warm demanders.” In the content classroom, warm demanders calibrate their expectations to meet the needs of each learner and cultivate interpersonal relationships so students will cooperate when necessary (Virtue, 2007). These same teachers are intentional about their practice, reflect on that practice, and have the nous [common sense] to seek

out new ways of encouraging student participation and success in content literacy activities.

Interconnectivity Through Instruction

Students who are struggling or striving often have difficulty making connections across content areas (Rockwell, 2008). However, when content teachers connect student prior knowledge with new content explicitly, so that students see the relationship between what is being studied in one classroom and topics from other classes, these students benefit academically (Brozo & Simpson, 2007; Coyne, Kame'enui, & Carnine, 2007; Deshler & Schumaker, 2006). Thus, the best teachers of content literacy not only integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking with topics being studied but also are armed with evidence-based strategies that are used to integrate their topics and concepts across content areas.

Adaptive Expertise and Lifetime Learning

Expertise is a word closely associated with content area teaching, particularly content expertise. Hatano and Oura (2003) characterized effective content literacy teachers as “adaptive experts.” What this means is that effective teachers are more willing to modify their core teaching beliefs and are more flexible across their teaching and learning careers than are their less successful colleagues. Because they experiment with new strategies and techniques, they develop teaching and learning expertise that allows them to act competently and flexibly when faced with

students experiencing difficulty learning (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, & Hammerness, 2005).

These teachers are both efficient and innovative. They handle classroom rituals with aplomb and incorporate novelty into their instruction via new strategies, hands-on activities, collaborative learning, technology integration, or concept-related projects done outside the classroom. These adaptive experts choose “what to abandon and what to keep or modify” (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005, p. 363) so that their instruction is based on effective practice and professional insight.

“Street Creds” With Students

The need to connect to students’ backgrounds, interests, and cultures goes without saying, but determining the level at which it should occur is subjective. Although not always cited as an effective teacher characteristic, many effective teachers know what television shows students are watching, what movies are their favorites, and the video games they are mastering. This knowledge is used in conversation with students and can result in a higher level of cooperation and motivation. Additionally, teachers who can talk about technology and the Internet with their students will garner respect, particularly when one considers—as reported by Hayes (2007)—that children ages 8–17 admit to spending an average of 7 hours online a week. The Internet is truly an outside literacy that should be considered.

Teachers who haven’t been on YouTube or who lack experience with one of the social networking websites are missing opportunities to connect to their students’ lives and interests. Staying abreast of developments in the world that students live in, whether it is music, sports, or what they are reading on the Internet, can go a long way toward developing teacher “street creds.” This level of personal connection with students can translate into a more productive classroom environment (Huddleston, 2003). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2008) has as its first core proposition a teacher’s commitment to the students. This proposition is not just about teachers having specific knowledge about their students’ academic level but includes having knowledge about students’ personal interests and social characteristics. As Walsh (2006) noted, successful teachers recognize that knowing as much as

possible about their target audience is the best way to make their teaching relevant.

A Final Word About the Teacher

It’s clear that effective teachers of content literacy possess special skills and abilities. How, then, do we translate what is known about effective teachers into support for other less skillful or capable teachers? If the key to greater student learning is the teacher, then the key to teacher improvement is effective professional development (Cooter, 2003). Ongoing modeling, mentoring, guided practice, and feedback should be offered by literacy coaches and others who have demonstrated competence in forming meaningful relationships with students that lead to higher levels of reading engagement and more productive content learning.

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